

Two Cultures no Two Cultures

Review of Guy Ortolano, The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain (Cambridge: CUP, 2009)

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Mercifully and emphatically this is *not* a book about the supposed division between the “two cultures” of the arts and sciences. Rather it is by far the most comprehensive attempt to situate the “Two Cultures debate” in the wider contexts of British post-war historiography, politics, educational reform and science theory. This rejection of the Two Cultures *thesis* has the odd status of being both an aside and the book’s primary message. It takes up almost no space, but it is crucial, particularly as the consensus grows that C.P. Snow’s 1959 Rede Lecture cannot be taken seriously unless it is duly historicized, and the Two Cultures *debate* instead used as a powerful lens with which to view ’50s and ’60s concerns. This is the approach that was pursued vigorously though briefly by David Edgerton in his *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970* (2006). There the crudity of the basic categories, the naivety of the historiography employed and the weird denunciations of literary types were laid bare, and the verdict now looks final. As Edgerton pointed out, to reject Snow is to side with F.R. Leavis, who, it must be remembered, was not merely the other interlocutor in the debate, but rather offered the most prominent early rejection of the terms of the debate as set by Snow. Historians of the period — and indeed of whatever real splits there are and have been between artists and sciences, the humanities and the sciences, the literary and the technical, etc. — should doubtless follow Ortolano, who seeks here to “dislodge the ‘two cultures’ as a category of analysis.” (p. 26)

In the absence of the “two cultures” themselves, Ortolano uses the debate as a way in to explorations of a series of interrelated cultural-historical themes. The basic move made here is as follows: “what has previously been read as a *disciplinary* dispute about the arts and the sciences was actually an *ideological* conflict between competing visions of Britain’s past, present, and future.” (p. 1, italics in original) This ideological analysis can be split into two main parts: first, Ortolano presents the particular “worldviews” of Snow and Leavis — these are the “technocratic liberalism” of the former, and the “radical liberalism” of the latter. Ortolano uses these tags to highlight the key similarities and differences between the protagonists. Both were mired in what Ortolano terms the “meritocratic moment” dated c. 1945–c. 1975. Snow held that a new class of experts could bring about a bureaucratic revolution, replacing politics with “management” and therefore securing a role for upwardly mobile civil servants like himself. Leavis’ attitude towards meritocracy was more complex; his generally oppositional stance makes any stable characterisation difficult. Like Snow, Leavis viewed the niche he had carved for himself as paradigmatic. To resolve the ills of modern society, the literary critic was to preserve the primacy of language and the embodiment of an ethical order in the realm of literature. The meritocracy of this lies mainly in the cultivation of a sort of priestly connoisseurship. The second part of

Ortolano's treatment of ideology explores the ways in which these idiosyncratic worldviews applied to and were forged from four major contemporary themes: the nature of higher education, and specifically the academic study of English; the formalisation of a new social history; the notion of national decline; and the potential (or lack thereof) for England to act as a world leader via development and/or modernisation.

All of these large themes are, of course, marshalled around the playing out of the debate around Snow's lecture, the narrative of which is dealt with smartly and without unnecessary flourish. The support and dissent that the thesis garnered and the vicious response by Leavis three years later easily bear the weight of analysis, and the extremely complex issues listed above receive deft treatment. Although Snow's and Leavis' stances appear nothing if not predictable, that is at least in part due to the clarity of Ortolano's exposition. Two passages in particular stand out as set-pieces: first, the chapter whose title I found least promising, 'A tale of two colleges', recounts the attempts by both men to create a university setting and ultimately a literary criticism in their own image — Churchill English for Snow and Downing English for Leavis. These two projects, in their audacity and egotism alone, are stunning. Snow sought nothing less than the vitiation of the entire modernist project (at least in his limited understanding of what *that* meant). His own brand of stolid realism would be shown to have vanquished the proto-Fascist experimentalists of the early-twentieth century, all in the setting of a college set up expressly to train a new scientific elite. (It is worth dwelling on the perversity of Snow's attack on the very modernism that was concomitant with the architecture and fabric of his beloved college — one unrealised vision of which adorns *The Two Cultures Controversy's* jacket.) Leavis, meanwhile, and with far greater theoretical subtlety and zeal, hoped that Downing would be the centre of his own Lit. Crit. empire, working tirelessly to establish and maintain the "great tradition" of books that preserved the vitality of Language made Life. The second set-piece comes much later, in the analysis of narratives of national decline, which Ortolano shows to have been of dubious veracity but of unending rhetorical elasticity. For Snow this meant transforming the success of his Two Cultures thesis into a case for political reform. In a remarkable passage he is shown to have made it almost all the way to the top, influencing policy for a brief time in the late 1950s through the "Gaitskell Group", led by the industrialist Marcus Brumwell and counting P.M.S. Blackett, Solly Zuckerman, J.D. Bernal and Jacob Bronowski amongst their number (in addition to the Labour heavyweights Harold Wilson, Jim Callaghan, Richard Crossman and, naturally, the leader himself Hugh Gaitskell). This addition to our understanding of the origins of the "white heat" moment of Labour/scientific & technological ascendancy is exceedingly interesting and beautifully pitched. More broadly, Ortolano's use of the Two Cultures debate to examine the various narratives of decline is masterly.

But we should pause at that list of scientific big cheeses. There, and dotted throughout the book, is the core of an earlier generation of left-wing scientists and science theorists. J.D. Bernal is of especial interest, given his status as the great ideologue of *The Social Function of Science* (1939), who not only prefigured many of Snow's arguments about a technocratic elite but also planned a book on the historical interrelations between the arts and sciences. Keeping this in mind, I would like now to turn to my few slight reservations about *The Two Cultures Controversy*. The first is, I think, largely superficial. It concerns the political terminology used, primarily the word "liberal".

That Snow and Leavis both emerge as “liberal” should already raise some suspicion. The term is mainly used here to imply a staunch individualism, and there is evidence that both Leavis and Snow used it in that way and in relation to themselves at various times. However, individualism is not the only concept captured by “liberalism”, especially in light of the progressive politics and convoluted history of the Liberal Party. The best one can say is that then, as now, the term was hotly contested. But that fact is only brought out implicitly by Ortolano, and should have been stated boldly, not least because it justifies his using the term with such flexibility. In any case, the theories of both Snow and Leavis do emerge in all their peculiar glory (perhaps in spite of rather than because of the terminology employed).

But then that fact leads me to a further observation, again terminological, this time concerning “ideology”. The overall structure of the book is, as I have mentioned, determined by continual recourse to a comparative analysis of Snow’s and Leavis’ “worldviews”, in order to approach more general ideological concerns in the period. This creates a general feeling of what I can only describe as claustrophobia. Ortolano states early on that he is not going to attempt either genealogical or structural history — neither intellectual nor social history, but rather a form of cultural history that draws on those two other traditions. The result, focussed so closely on the patterns of thought of two highly eccentric individuals, left me somewhat unsatisfied in two specific and closely related respects. First, it lays too much emphasis on the internal coherence of the worldviews under consideration. Snow, for his part, seems at times to draw heavily on the work of the left-wing scientists who receive only brief mention; yet he violently uproots their views for his own purposes — taking, for example, the morally neutral conception of science that J.D. Bernal had formulated in defence of a similarly ‘neutral’ Marxism in the 1930s, but deploying that idea to further the aims of a strictly hierarchical social structure, albeit one based on merit rather than class. Leavis, meanwhile, is granted a richer intellectual heritage, largely thanks to the undeniable importance for his later thinking of the journal *Scrutiny*, which he edited with his wife Q.D. Leavis between 1932 and 1953. But even here we are still left with only tantalising glimpses of the origins of his thought in earlier intellectual climes. In addition, the fact of both men’s thoroughgoing but completely different rejections of Marxism surely warrants closer study in a work dealing with ideology *and* realpolitik.

Now, in a work in which the biographical component was not so overbearing it would not be an adequate criticism to claim that the contradictory and idiosyncratic origins of a worldview need explaining. The mere existence of various worldviews could perfectly well be deployed in order to show their mutual dependence on some other historical factor, or their ultimate origins and fates could be discussed, or any number of other things. But here, as no genealogies are offered for Snow’s and Leavis’ schemes, it appears either that they were formed out of the materials of post-war cultural politics (which we know to be incorrect chronologically) or that the worldviews appeared fully formed in their minds and were deployed with or against the current of the Two Cultures debate as it reached its widest arena. This last option may contain a grain of truth, but it cannot be the whole story when dealing with a cast of characters that does, as we have seen, include those earlier ideologues. It is a commonplace to observe that in the period of the Cold War countless people — even groups or ‘schools’ and large philosophical and artistic movements — appeared to lose their earlier political commitments. Snow at least is surely a part of that story,

and in that context Ortolano's rejection of the genealogical approach seems unduly limiting. Naturally, as we begin to leave the period of the Two Cultures debate proper the benefits of the genealogical approach emerge, for example in the bizarre appropriation of Michael Polanyi's account of seventeenth-century science and critique of disinterested observation by an increasingly embattled Leavis. The rough texture of this exchange of ideas is welcome after the all-too-smooth characterisation of the origins and development of the two local ideologies under consideration.

I should note that this particular problem only comes to affect the latter chapters, and then mildly. The move from personal to general ideology is otherwise deftly handled; it is merely the constant recourse to the Snow-then-Leavis take on such-and-such phenomenon that becomes stretched.

Returning to the aside/thesis of the book, the notion that the two cultures debate can only properly be treated historically serves at once to condemn and then recover Snow, to praise and then lose interest in Leavis. It is to side with Leavis on the (ir)relevance of the two cultures tag itself, but as I have suggested it is Snow's worldview that is the more historically revealing, appearing, as it does, paradigmatic of so many intellectual currents in the post-war era. The heightened interest of the patently wrong is a well-known historiographical trope, miring us in an equally important struggle with the sheer difficulty of justifying agreement with past historical actors. Here, for example, the persistence of Leavis in the narrative is tricky — as Snow's political posturing becomes more telling, the role of Leavis becomes unclear. We have agreed with him, effectively, that the debate should continue along other lines, but there he is, still offering a point of comparison for Snow, the narrative staunchly sticking to its original course. This does him a disservice. *Some* of his views have great contemporary relevance, but those views concern the development and debasement of language, a non-Marxian critique of false-consciousness and the development of capitalism, and so on. As Ortolano notes, neither Snow nor Leavis would be particularly happy with their present Two Cultures reputation — at least a book of this subtlety and range offers them hope, avoiding as it does the now thankfully terminable rehashing of the Two Cultures debate itself.